**NATIONAL FEDERATION OF THE BLIND CAREER MENTORING PROGRAM**

**Benefits of a Mentoring Program for Blind Youth**

Mentoring has become an effective strategy used by millions of individuals and thousands of organizations to offer the necessary guidance and support that leads to success. Members of the National Federation of the Blind (NFB) have been actively practicing mentoring since the organization’s founding in 1940. The NFB, the largest and most influential organization of blind people, was founded by a great mentor, Dr. Jacobus tenBroek, who learned from his own mentor—Dr. Newel Perry. In a speech dedicated to Newel Perry, *Newel Perry: Teacher of Youth and Leader of Men*, Dr. tenBroek explains, “. . . the key to his great influence with blind students was, first of all, the fact that he was blind and therefore understood their problems; and second, that he believed in them and made his faith manifest.”

The NFB’s Career Mentoring Program highlights the power of combining best practices in mentoring with the philosophy of the NFB—a philosophy that combines high expectations, a positive attitude, the value of the alternative techniques of blindness, and the solid belief that it is okay to be blind. Thousands of blind Americans have successfully navigated the path from education to career success and are willing to share their experiences and insight with young people. Confronting public and employer attitudes, benefiting from programs such as Social Security, vocational rehabilitation, and education, and learning about access technology and employment opportunities are challenging tasks. Young blind persons who are not connected to a network of blind mentors must continually reinvent the wheel by working through these challenges on their own. “Mentoring helps youth develop skills, knowledge, and motivation during transition to postsecondary education and employment.” (Whelley et al., 2003).

The principal objectives of the NFB’s Career Mentoring Program are to: (1) unite inexperienced individuals who are blind (mentees) with knowledgeable, blind role models (mentors) who are familiar with the art of successfully living without vision; and (2) both informally and formally assist mentees to prepare for the academic and work world so that they can achieve academic and career success. The NFB matches transition age blind and visually impaired youth and young adults with successful blind mentors for the purpose of:

* increasing knowledge and participation in the vocational rehabilitation process,
* increasing postsecondary academic success, and
* increasing high-quality employment and community integration.

Although most vocational rehabilitation agencies offer services to help guide youth as they transition from high school to college or employment, those services are not tailored to the unique issues faced by blind people. Blind youth need exposure to positive blind role models who demonstrate a solid belief in the abilities of blind people and can, through guidance and example, raise expectations and offer practical tips and tricks for accessing resources and acquiring skills for success.

It is well documented in counseling and human development research that a relationship with a supportive person is the most important factor in personal growth. A close personal relationship is the key to enhancing an individual's self-esteem. Not only can mentors help their mentees develop important life-management skills that can lead to economic independence and personal empowerment, but they can share their experiences and personal knowledge regarding services available to the blind and help their mentees become aware of the multitude of community, educational, career exploration, and economic resources available to them, as well as ways to effectively use those resources. Mentors further can help participants learn how to function more successfully in the business world and mainstream society. Mentees may often lack the contacts, behaviors, language, and skills to get ahead in the world at large, and mentors can help them navigate different kinds of social, work, and business situations and broaden their outlook.

**Framework of NFB Career Mentoring Program**

1. Mentoring Matrix Model

The NFB uses a mentoring matrix model for its Career Mentoring Program. Each mentee is matched with two to three mentors. During the matching process, information is gathered from the mentees about career interests and/or goals, academic interests, hobbies, and extracurricular activities so that mentors who share one or more of a mentee’s interests and/or who are successful in a career of interest to the mentee can be identified and matched with that mentee. Our mentoring matrix provides a mentee with:

* increased exposure to educational, training, and career opportunities
* a diversity and breadth of work-based learning experiences
* a greater number of successful blind role models with different educational backgrounds and career paths from whom to learn self-advocacy skills
* an extended network of contacts
* increased community involvement and sense of belonging
* a robust ongoing support system

1. Monthly Mentor-Mentee Interactions

Mentors and mentees will interact with each other a minimum of eight hours per month, but preferably between twelve and twenty hours, *i.e.*, face to face, telephone, text, social media

1. Monthly conference calls with all mentees
2. Monthly conference calls with all mentors
3. Quarterly on-site weekend retreats with all mentors and mentees
4. Monthly reporting to the agency
5. Monthly invoicing to the agency

**Cost of NFB Career Mentoring Program**

The cost of the NFB Career Mentoring Program ranges between $600 and $800 per mentee, per month, depending on the particular programming implemented by the agency, as well as geographic region. The monthly fee per mentee includes but is not limited to:

* Recruitment of blind mentors
* Collaboration with the agency to recruit blind mentees
* Background checks of mentors
* Screening and matching process of mentees with mentors
* Mentor training
* Implementation of activities and programming
* Implementation of evaluation process
* Monthly mentee conference calls
* Monthly mentor conference calls
* Quarterly weekend retreats
* Preparation of invoices and reporting for the agency